

R 091438Z JUL 08
FM AMEMBASSY MBABANE
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3145
INFO SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY
AMEMBASSY DAKAR
AMEMBASSY ROME
AMEMBASSY NAIROBI

UNCLAS MBABANE 000197

DEPT FOR AF/S (MNAYLOR)
DEPT FOR EB/TRA/OTB, AF/S, DS/IP/AF (CLISENBEE)
DAKAR FOR FAA REP
ROME FOR TSA REP
NAIROBI FOR TSA REP
FAA FOR NANCY ANGELO

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: ECON EAIR ELAB CASC ASEC TSA WZ
SUBJECT: PROBLEMS STILL PLAGUING SWAZI AIRPORT

REF: (A) MBABANE 0014, (B) MBABANE 0081, (C) Mbabane 000130

¶11. SUMMARY: Since January 2008, safety conditions at Swaziland's Matsapha International Airport have attracted increasing attention from the local press and public. The main problems affecting the airport are unreliable back-up generators, bird strikes, and an unresolved labor union dispute. In 2006, a negative International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) report on conditions at Matsapha, combined with Government of the Kingdom of Swaziland's (GKOS) refusal to respond to European Union (EU) flight safety inquiries led the EU to ban their officials (but not private travelers) from flying on all Swazi registered air carriers. Swazi fixed-wing aircraft are also prohibited from flying in EU airspace. A new airport is currently under construction in anticipation of South Africa hosting of World Cup 2010. Request for action, paragraph 7; post would appreciate information regarding latest FAA study of airport. END SUMMARY

KEEPING THE LIGHTS ON

¶12. Over the last six months, Swaziland's sole airport, Matsapha International Airport, has experienced erratic power outages because of a shortage of electricity generating capacity and an unreliable power grid. In January, air conditioners in the control tower stopped functioning, leading the air traffic controllers to abandon the control tower due to excessive heat. Back-up generators were purchased, but required repair to correct a minor timing delay. They were replaced with second-hand non-functioning generators, creating backup failures. According to the airport's Operations Manager, these generators were second-hand and non-functioning, creating frequent blackouts. Currently, Matsapha airport has no functioning back-up generators. On June 22, a power outage struck the area and the back-up generators failed to start, forcing a Swazi Airlink flight arriving from Johannesburg to return to South Africa, because the runway lights were off.

BIRDS AND PLANES DON'T MIX

¶13. Matsapha airport has fairly frequent bird strikes. While bird strikes are an unfortunate reality in aviation, airport authorities have not taken any steps to minimize their occurrence. On June 26, the Swazi Airlink flight carrying Southern African Development Community (SADC) Executive Secretary Tomas Salomao suffered engine failure due to bird ingestion on take off from Matsapha. Local media has reported that three similar incidents have occurred in the last three months. According to an airline official, the GKOS ended the previous policy of culling birds in the airport area for environmental reasons, leading to a rapidly increasing bird population in the area. Swazi Airlink undertook the purchase of a siren-equipped vehicle to disperse bird flocks on the runway before aircraft take-offs and landings. While they acknowledge that this is not a very effective strategy, Airlink believes it is better than doing nothing.

LABOR ISSUES

¶4. In a dispute dating back to 2003, GKOS does not pay overtime to airport workers outside of airport operating hours of 0700-2030 daily. Airport staff regularly have to work beyond standard operation hours due to regular delays and as well as VIP flights commonly landing after hours. In January, air traffic controllers went on "wild-cat strikes" and in June the airport workers' union announced a work slow-down in protest of the non-resolution of their overtime pay dispute. Serious challenges remain in resolving the labor dispute, as union demands exceed GKOS and airport administrators' limits.

SIKUPHE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

¶5. GKOS, with significant funding by the government of Taiwan, is building a new airport, Sikuphe International Airport, in anticipation of a large tourism influx from the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. The new airport, built at the request of the King, is located about a two hour drive east of Mbabane. Sikuphe will be capable of handling the largest commercial aircraft in the world (B747, A380), and has an expansion potential of up to five passenger terminals, as well as a VIP terminal. In contrast, Matsapha International handles five daily turbo-prop commuter flights from Johannesburg. No new commercial operators have announced they will commence service to Sikuphe. The new airport plans to open before the World Cup tournament in June 2010, but even if that date is met, there seems to be no corresponding preparation of the technical and service work force that is necessary for support.

¶6. COMMENT: Embassy is not aware of the air worthiness of Swazi registered aircraft servicing Matsapha. Poor record keeping by the Swaziland Civil Aviation Authorities and limited oversight of the registration of aircraft makes it difficult to collect information regarding safety conditions at Matsapha and aboard Swazi Airlink aircraft. Embassy does not foresee a quick end to Matsapha's continuing electrical and labor problems. An encouraging sign is that South African Airways provides all maintenance and safety checks on Swazi Airlink aircraft. Nevertheless, on July 4, a local newspaper reported that a "faulty" Swazi Airlink aircraft aborted its landing at Matsapha airport the previous evening due to non-functioning communications equipment on the plane and pilot error, creating additional questions about aircraft safety.

¶7. Embassy has growing concerns for the safety of passengers using Matsapha Airport and Swazi Airlink aircraft, but is not prepared to request authorization to join the EU in prohibiting travel by U.S. Citizens aboard Swazi Airlink flights at this time. We believe a study should be conducted by the U.S. Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) to determine the safety of Matsapha Airport and Swazi registered aircraft.

PARKER